Unit 1: Lecture A - War and Culture

Many agree that war is as old as mankind.  We might not, however, always think of the relationship between this old and persistent activity and the cultures participating in war.  Below, you will find views and definitions of war from various peoples and disciplines.

Anthropologist Lawrence Keeley recounts:

The earliest recorded histories are military histories.  The earliest Egyptian hieroglyphs record the victories of Egypt’s first pharaohs, the Scorpion King and Narmer.  The first secular literature or history recorded in cuneiform recounts the Adventures of the Sumerian warrior-king Gilgamesh.  The earliest written parts of the Books of Moses, the ‘J-strand (called so because in its passages the name given to God is Yahweh or Jehovah), culminate in the brutal Hebrew conquest of Canaan.  The earliest annals of the Chinese, Greeks, and Romans are concerned with wars and warrior kings.  Most Mayan hieroglyphic texts are devoted to the genealogies, biographies, and military exploits of Mayan kings.  The folklore and legends of preliterate cultures, the epic oral traditions that are the precursors to history, are equally bellicose.  Indeed, until this century, historiography was dominated by accounts of wars and the political intrigues that led up to them.  Lawrence Keeley. War Before Civilization: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage.  New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 3-4.

James M. Morris:

Warfare has always played a key role in history…Because some persons have always felt a compulsion to impose their will on others, the history of peoples and nations has been marked by war.  War, as a consequence, has been a prime determinant of the fate of peoples and nations.  America’s Armed Forces, A History.  Second edition.  Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1994, p. 1.

Fifth-century Greek historian Heraclitus wrote:  
Polemos pater panton: war is the father of all things

Donald Kagan:

War has been a persistent part of human experience since before the birth of civilization.  Donald Kagan.  On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace.  New York: Anchor Books – A Division of Random House, 1996, p. 5

The earliest civilizations were Egypt and Mesopotamia were from the first occupied with war, as were later Bronze and Iron Age cultures all over the world…The earliest civilizations of China were established by armies.  Ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle took an enduring human nature and the persistence of war for granted.  P. 5

The Greek states, the Athenian democracy no less than any other, were warrior communities that accepted without question the naturalness of war and the absolute obligation of each able-bodied man to do military service and risk his life for his community.  He also regarded these actions as among the highest attributes of a man, proof of his freedom and dignity and a source of honor and glory, themselves the highest values for human beings.  The Romans had even fewer hesitations about the desirability of power and the naturalness of war than the Greeks.  Theirs was a culture that venerated the military virtues.  It was a society that valued power, glory, and the responsibilities of leadership, even domination, without embarrassment.  The effort needed to preserve these things could be taken for granted; it was in the nature of things and part of the human condition.  P. 570.

Roman males owed the state sixteen years of military service between ages 17 and 46, though legislation could extend that period to twenty-nine, and no Roman could hold public office until he had completed ten years of that service.  Not quoted but from 570.

American historians Will and Ariel Durant calculated that there had only been 268 years free of war in the previous 3,421.  Will and Ariel Durant.  The Lessons of History.  New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968, p. 81.  Historian Arther Ferrill noted that “organized warfare appeared at least by the end of the Paleolithic Age….From the Stone Age, at least as far back as ten thousand years ago, organized armies in formation fought one another and built fortifications to protect themselves and their people from attacks from other armies.”  Arther Ferrill.  The Origins of War: From the Stone Age to Alexander the Great.  Revised edition.  Boulder CO: Westview Press, pp. 13, 18-31.

Michael Grant:

“far and away the most important and frequent events in ancient history are wars”  Ancient History.  New York, 1965, p. 128.

Definition of war:  
John Whiteclay Chambers II, ed.  The Oxford Companion to American Military History.  Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 773-775.

“First…an organized violent activity, waged not by individuals but by men (sometimes joined by women) in groups. Second, war is a mutual activity; whatever takes place in it relates, or should relate, primarily to the enemy’s movements with the aim of defeating him and avoid being defeated oneself.  Third, the conduct of war is conditioned on the hope for victory, or at the very least self-preservation.  Where that hope does not exist, there can be no war, only suicide.

War being an organized activity, the best way to classify it is neither by tactics nor by weaponry but by the nature of the human communities that wage it.  Thus we find that some very small and very loosely organized communities, such as the South African Bushmen or Arctic Eskimo, did not have war but merely more or less violent duels among individuals.  More complex ‘tribes without ruler,’ such as the Indians of the North American Plains, did engage in war; yet there was still no specialized organization for waging it, since every healthy adult male was a warrior by definition.  Probably the first individuals who were in any sense specialized warriors were the retainers of tribal chiefs such as still existed in areas of Africa until recently.  The classical Mediterranean city-states were, in this respect, less advanced; they did not have armies but only militias that were mustered as war broke out and went home as it ended.  The task of building standing forces was left to empires, like those of ancient Egypt or Assyria or China or Rome.  For a long time these remained the strongest military-political organizations.

The characteristic modern way of organizing war, which grew out of the transformation of feudal into modern society, is to entrust it to be directed by the state.  For 300 years, since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 ended the Thirty Years War, states alone have been authorized to wage war; conversely, whenever aggression and violence were used by individuals, or by other groups and organizations, it was known as crime, uprising, rebellion, or civil war.  Inside each state a distinction was drawn between the government, which alone could conduct the war at the highest level; the armed forces, whose task was to fight; and the civilian population, whose assigned role was to pay and sustain the effort.  By setting up an organization whose members, even at the highest levels, were selected for their professionalism rather than their loyalty (which had been the case in empires and feudal societies) and who were dedicated solely to war, the state and its resources led the way to unprecedented technological development in the military field.  So great were the modern state’s military and warmaking capabilities that by 1914, some half-dozen industrialized states had come virtually to dominate the world.

Not only did the modern state wage war more effectively than any other organization, but war itself played a great role in the construction of the modern state.  First came the establishment of civilian bureaucracies, whose primary function was to obtain resources for war and extract the taxes that would be used to pay the troops.  Next came such institutions as the national debt and paper money, both of which had their origin in the need to finance war.  During the nineteenth century, the advent of railways and telegraphs for the first time enabled large states to begin to harness virtually their entire resources for military purposes; this culminated in the era of ‘total war’ (1914-45) when such governments took over control of almost every aspect of their citizens’ lives from the wages that they were paid to the temperature of the water in which they could bather.  These trends affected the United States, which was relatively isolated and safe, much later than they did the main European powers, which confronted each other directly.  Still, even in the United States the task of building a strong centralized state was linked to war, initially in the American Civil War, but more dramatically in World War I and World War II.  In the long run, the United States built a military-industrial complex larger than any other in the world.

As the warmaking communities developed and became more sophisticated, so did the scale on which they fought and the methods they used.  Early tribal societies counted their warriors in the dozens and knew only the raid, the ambush, the skirmish, and sometimes the setpiece encounter (agreed upon in advance) that can be seen as part war, part sport.  With the establishment of chiefdoms, there appeared forces numbering in the hundreds or at most thousands, as well as battle and siege operations, whereas empires could count their troops in the hundreds of thousands and were capable of conducting sophisticated operations that lasted for years on end.  However, all premodern political entities were hampered in their conduct of war by problems of both logistics and communications.  The former meant that armed forces spent more time looking after their supplies that actively campaigning, and indeed that war itself was usually a seasonal activity – in the summer.  The latter not only prevented the coordination of operations from the capital but made it virtually impossible for the armed forces of any one state to cooperate with each other on anything larger than a tactical scale once they had been united on the battlefield.

Modern technology during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century put an end to these limitations.  Instead of coming about by tacit agreement between the commanders of both sides, battles could be developed into coherent campaigns; campaigns waged in different theaters could be integrated with the conduct of war as a whole, and the latter coordinated from the national capital, which also controlled the mobilization of demographic and economic resources.  The different levels of war – from minor tactics through tactics and the operational art and strategy all the way to grand strategy – made their appearance.  More and more, war came to be waged by vast powers or coalitions of powers, each counting their subjects in the dozens if not hundreds of millions.  Once unleashed by the Industrial Revolution, military technology mushroomed.  Between 1815 and 1945, it took war from flintlocks to tanks and from foot-slogging soldiers to long-range bomber aircraft and the first ballistic missiles.

Throughout these millennia of organizational and technological growth, the character of war as a mutual activity remained unchanged.  War involves the use of organized violence to achieve one’s end, often to the maximum extent possible; but that violence is directed against a living, reacting enemy, who in turn uses violence to achieve his ends.  Hence, the real essence of war, in whatever form and at whatever level, is the interplay between the two sides’ moves and countermoves.

Assuming that the force on one side is not overwhelming – in which case little or no military art will be required – to achieve victory it is necessary to strike at a point that is both vital and vulnerable.  To force the enemy to expose his vulnerable point, it is necessary to deceive him as to one’s intentions.  To deceive him, it is usually necessary to pretend to strike at some other point or points which will weaken one’s ability to launch the decisive stroke as well as to defend oneself.

In this way, war is subject to a peculiar logic of its own, which has been aptly called ‘paradoxical.’  It differs from engineering activities, whose object is to mold inorganic matter, but in some ways resembles games such as football or chess; like them, it consists of action, counteraction, and counter-counteraction, all of which are accompanied by a bodyguard of secrecy, lies, feints, and sometimes even espionage.  The resulting uncertainty, the friction that is inherent in the activity of large bodies of people, and the sheer risk to life and limb that is involved, combine to make the conduct of war extraordinarily difficult.  As Napoleon once said, intellectually it poses problems worthy of a Newton or an Euler; however, the character attributes that it demands – such as courage, endurance, determination, the ability to keep one’s mind clear in a crisis – are, if anything, even greater.

Still, assuming a rough balance between opposing sides, in theory, victory goes to the side that, reading the enemy’s intentions while concealing its own, is able to strike hardest at the decisive point without exposing itself.  In practice, the necessary calculation are often much too complicated for any one brain or combination of brains, with the result that, as in the case of many games, the outcome depends on making the fewest mistakes, as well as pure chance.

With the advent of nuclear weapons – themselves made possible by the tremendous scientific and industrial resources at the disposal of the modern state – warfare seems to have undergone a decisive change.  Hitherto, it had often been possible for one side to use some combination of force and guile in order to achieve victory at a cost acceptable to itself.  Now, the prospect had to be faced that victory, instead of guaranteeing one’s existence, would lead to annihilation as the defeated side fell on the nuclear button.  Indeed, the more resounding the victory, the more acute the danger that this would happen.  Under such circumstances, it is scant wonder that those states that possessed nuclear weapons – meaning, by and large, the most powerful ones – generally began taking very good care not to commit suicide and to avoid escalating conflicts between each other.  The more nuclear weapons proliferated, the less important and less powerful the states against which large-scale, conventional warfare (as in the period 1648-1945) could still be fought.

Reflecting these developments, military organization and military technology reversed direction.  Throughout the years since A.D. 1000, armies and navies had been getting larger and larger, culminating in the tens of millions of uniformed personnel who served during World Wars I and II; now, all of a sudden, they began to shrink as the most important states abandoned the system of mass mobilization of the kind that initially appeared after 1789.  For the first time in history, some weapons – specifically, the most important ones by far – were deliberately made less, rather than more, powerful.  Neither the most powerful missiles, such as the American Titan, nor the monster hydrogen bomb of 58 megatons (58 million tons of TNT) that the Soviets exploded in 1961 had successors.  Research and development were redirected in an effort to develop more accurate delivery systems such as multiple independent reentry vehicles (MIRVs) and cruise missiles carrying more limited warheads: Both reflected the feeling that their city-destroying predecessors had grown too indiscriminate and too dangerous to serve any useful purpose.

As nuclear weapons put a ceiling on the size and violence of wars between nations, such wars became rarer at the end of the twentieth century.  Beginning in the so-called Third World and spreading to the Second, their place as an agent of political change was increasingly taken by another form of war.  This new form of war was not based on the customary division of labor among government, armed forces, and people.  Since it did not require a large, continuous, statelike territorial basis, it was immune to those weapons and could be waged even in their presence.  Guerrilla warfare and terrorism and counterterrorism were, in fact, anything but new phenomena; however, the fact that they were directed against the occupying Axis powers during World War II had given them a new respectability as well as legitimacy in international law.  As Europe’s overseas expansionism shows, until 1914 its armies had usually been able to confront with overwhelming force peoples who did not have states, governments, or regular armed forces.  But from the moment Adolf Hitler invaded Yugoslavia in 1941, this clearly ceased to be the case, as the Yugoslav partisans prevented even the German Wehrmacht from conquering all of their country.

Though the forces at the disposal were usually small and their weapons primitive, guerrillas and terrorists in dozens upon dozens of cases since 1945 have defeated the most modern armies and the most powerful modern states that ever existed.  In the 1990s, they continued to resist successfully the armed forces of many states around the world, nor, to judge by cases from Algeria to Bosnia to Somalia, does it appear modern states know how to deal with them.  For those states and their armed forces, the writing is on the wall.  Under the shadow of the mushroom cloud, a new form of war that is simultaneously very old is reemerging and asserting itself.  Either modern states learn to cope with it, or they themselves will soon disappear into the dustbin of history.”

Sources: Sun Tzu, The Art of War, 1963.  Carl von Clausewitz, On War, 1976.  Edward Luttwak, Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace, 1987.  Martin van Creveld, The Transformation of War, 1991.